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Institutional entrepreneurship and permaculture: A practice theory perspective

Audley Genus¹ | Marfuga Iskandarova¹ | Chris Warburton Brown²

¹Small Business Research Centre, Kingston University, Kingston, UK

²Permaculture Association Britain, Leeds, UK

Correspondence

Audley Genus, Small Business Research Centre, Kingston University, Kingston, UK.
Email: a.genus@kingston.ac.uk

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Abstract

Permaculture is a growing but little researched phenomenon emphasising care for the environment, equity, fair treatment of people and working with—and not against—nature. It thus represents a potential alternative to business as usual, capable of addressing fundamental challenges posed by human-made climate change. The paper examines a previously ignored site of entrepreneurship by taking a practice perspective, exploring connections between the practice and growth of permaculture and institutional entrepreneurship. It assesses practice-related and institutional factors affecting the start-up and operation of permaculture enterprises in the United Kingdom. The study maps and surveys UK Permaculture Association members who have started up their own business and reports on qualitative data from personal interviews with twenty of them. Data analysis employs NVivo software and involves thematic analysis pertaining to the practice, institutional biographies and institutional portfolios of permaculture entrepreneurs. The findings show the importance of permaculture activists' institutional biographies and institutional portfolios to the start-up and operation of permaculture enterprises and for shaping permaculture-related practice. The contribution of the paper lies in how it balances attention to individual agency with subfield-specific, organisational field and macrosocial factors in understanding 'beyond profit' entrepreneurship.

KEYWORDS

institutional biography, institutional entrepreneurship, institutional portfolio, permaculture, practice theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is growing concern regarding the contribution of sustainable entrepreneurship to 'emancipatory' societal change and the remediation of grand challenges such as climate change, ageing and social and economic inequality. At the start of the 2010s, Shepherd and Patzelt (2011: 137) defined sustainable entrepreneurship as the 'preservation of nature, life support, and community in the pursuit of perceived opportunities to bring into existence future products,

processes, and services for gain, where gain is broadly construed to include economic and non-economic gains to individuals, the economy, and society'. This implies moving beyond a narrow focus on individual entrepreneurs and firms, to address questions of the practice and institutionalisation of 'beyond profit' enterprises (Shepherd, 2015). The paper aims to do so by addressing the following research question: What factors foster the institutionalisation of practices relevant to the growth of permaculture-inspired entrepreneurship in the United Kingdom? Answering this question does

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require attention to biography—the events and circumstances that predispose individual actors to certain ways of seeing the world and how it should be. However, the answers also turn on analysis of permaculture as a subfield that transcends the duality between agency and structure. In doing this, the paper should understand better the emergence of the shared practice of permaculture, the individual actions in which ‘sustainable entrepreneurs’ take and the struggle between the permaculture niche and mainstream approaches in the field of agriculture/food production and supply.

The paper builds on recent contributions that direct attention to the potential of institutional approaches to generate insight into entrepreneurship in which the achievement or resolution of societal goals and problems come to the fore (Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011). Such approaches, which include institutional entrepreneurship, may help to transcend the preoccupation with the lone, heroic, successful entrepreneur, for which the dominant entrepreneurship discourse has been criticised. Further, practice-theoretic and institutional approaches may enrich understanding of entrepreneurship as they help to identify the motives of and institutional pressures on prosocial entrepreneurs (Dacin et al., 2011), the collective or systemic nature of their practice (Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan, & James, 2015) and ‘hidden’ entrepreneurs (hip). They may also help to tease out the interaction of formal and informal institutions and their impact on sustainable entrepreneurship, as Stephan, Uhlaner, and Stride (2015) have tried to do with their work on institutional configurations.

Some critical issues for understanding sustainable entrepreneurship require further scrutiny, for example, in relation to nascent fields in which economic gains have a low priority for entrepreneurs, whose motivation might be fundamentally counter cultural. In such cases, what may be in question is the relationship between practising sustainability and institutional entrepreneurship in its deepest sense—connected with the structures and agency of those who ‘work with nature’ and attempt to turn societal and economic conventions upside down, while receiving only just enough money to live on. Academically, this calls for exploration of the nature of ‘practice’ in ‘fields’ informed by foundational contributions from sociology on practice theory (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Schatzki, 1997) and by organisational studies of the emergence, structure and dynamics of institutionalised ‘organisational fields’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1995). It may be that radical entrepreneurship brings into question relations and processes bridging individuals, groups and social movements, and even the very meaning(s) of entrepreneurship itself, transcending sustainable entrepreneurship as it has been conceptualised in the literature to date (see Esteves, Genus, Henfrey, Penha-Lopes, & East, 2020, this issue).

The paper investigates the connections, strategies, skills, knowledge and resources permaculture entrepreneurs need to setting up and developing their businesses. The investigation concerns the institutional portfolio, that is, the types of capital (human, social, cultural, economic) that individual entrepreneurs are able to deploy to challenge prevailing institutions, connected for example with food production and supply (c.f., Viale & Suddaby, 2009). The study also invokes the notion of institutional biographies—the ‘events,

relationships and circumstances’ that shape an individual's ‘access to and influence on institutions’ (c.f., Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011: 55). The approach treats permaculture entrepreneurs as both the products of prevailing institutions (connected with the work and values of permaculture and others) and the (re)producers of the values that structure the practice of permaculture. Yet the background experiences and skills of permaculturalists may be manifold, as may their interpretations of what they do in the name of ‘permaculture’ and ‘permaculture entrepreneurship’. This may give rise to an organisational subfield characterised by multiple institutional logics and forms, a subject that has received far less attention than institutional field-level heterogeneity (Battilana & Lee, 2014). The paper considers the implications thereof for the institutionalisation of permaculture and permaculture-inspired sustainable entrepreneurship, in relation to emerging theoretical insights.

The paper explores the role of elements of the practice of permaculture, that is, design principles, ecological insights, activities and ethics in the institutionalisation of permaculture-inspired entrepreneurship. Such practice may be found on understandings of business development and definitions of success, and perceptions of enterprise within the permaculture movement. By attending to such phenomena, the paper contributes to the development and bridging of entrepreneurship practice theory, institutional entrepreneurship and sustainable entrepreneurship. The paper argues for a transformation of the boundaries of entrepreneurship research and a concerted effort for it to reflect the diversity of—and challenges confronting—entrepreneurship practice (Welter, Baker, Audretsch, & Gartner, 2016), for example, by bringing proenvironmental and ‘prosocial’ organisations into focus, while appreciating the implications thereof for building new institutions.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews literature connecting institutional entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship as practice. The third section outlines the research methods employed for data collection and analysis. The fourth section presents findings, focusing on the results of a mapping exercise, an exploratory survey of permaculture entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom and data taken from interviews with a sample of these entrepreneurs. The penultimate section discusses the findings in relation to extant knowledge bearing on the study, and the final section provides a brief conclusion summing up the work of the paper and its contributions to knowledge.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

The research project reported in the paper is informed by and seeks to contribute to literature on the topics of institutional entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship as practice, as these have borne on the start-up and development of ‘deep green’ small and medium-sized enterprise (SMEs). There is a substantial amount of work relating to sustainable entrepreneurship (Allen & Malin, 2008; Crals & Vereek, 2005; Hockert & Wuestenhagen, 2010;

Kirkwood & Walton, 2010; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011) and increasing attention to entrepreneurship as practice. There has been much debate in the research about trade-offs, which may be made among competing sustainability and economic goals of entrepreneurs (Battilana & Lee, 2014; McMullen & Warnick, 2016). However, there is less work bridging sustainable entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship and practice that could offer a different view of such 'hybridity'.

Searching for studies that have sought to transcend thematic boundaries, it is apparent that work is being conducted on a wide range of related foci. Contributions are concerned typically with social enterprise and entrepreneurship, as distinct from ecological sustainable entrepreneurship. There is a subset of research for which the focus of inquiry is indigenous entrepreneurship (Maritz & Foley, 2018; Mika, Fahey, & Bensemann, 2009); another cluster is concerned with women entrepreneurs and gender in entrepreneurship (Akinbami, Olawoye, Adesina, & Nelson, 2019; Micelotta, Washington, & Docekalova, 2018; Qiu, 2018), and a third subset is concerned with social movements and systems or industry change (Carberry, Bharati, Levy, & Chaudhury, 2019; Reinecke, Manning, & von Hagen, 2012). In addition to these, there are individual contributions on diverse topics such as immigrants' entrepreneurship (Yeasmin & Koivurova, 2019), technology entrepreneurship (Hall, Matos, & Bachor, 2019) and policy entrepreneurship undertaken in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (Mintrom & Thomas, 2018). The following paragraphs review the contributions that are of closer relevance to the paper.

Some of these contributions are rooted in institutional entrepreneurship, especially the actions of entrepreneurs. For example, Brodnik and Brown (2018) examine the agency of institutional entrepreneurs, whose actions enabled change in dominant industry practices connected with the urban water management, employing a case study approach. Wakkee, van der Sijde, Vaupell, and Ghuman (2019) consider the institutional entrepreneurship of universities that enable sustainable entrepreneurship by helping to reduce the liabilities of smallness for new firms. Weisenfeld and Hauerwaas' (2018) focus is on the role of action and practice 'worksets' in changing institutional logic to enhance urban sustainable development. Their study involves the identification of local adopters of the novel logic that might diffuse the new worksets (in institutional language, these adopters are 'carriers' of the emerging institutional logic).

Coming from a primary concern for sustainable entrepreneurship, there are several relevant contributions, which again foreground the agency of entrepreneurs. Gasbarro, Rizzi, and Frey (2018) investigate how sustainable entrepreneurs negotiate institutional pillars in conservative contexts to build legitimacy for their activities as they effect institutional change in extant fields. Pacheco, Dean, and Payne (2010) examine the actions that entrepreneurs take to escape what they call the 'green prison'. They are concerned with the agency of entrepreneurs who create institutional structures favourable to the exploitation of opportunities for sustainable development. Arguably, both of these contributions neglect the mix of factors that shape, limit or enable agency, for example, personal background, association with a social movement and the institutional work that sustainable

entrepreneurs undertake. Taking into account such factors might produce insight into sustainable entrepreneurship more as shared values and everyday practice than the pursuit of competitive advantage (or evasion of competitive disadvantage). Spence, Gherib, and Biwole (2011) explicitly try to 'integrate' institutional and entrepreneurship theory to highlight possible meanings and practices of sustainable entrepreneurship. However, what is being integrated in the latter does not flow from an explicit engagement with the (then embryonic) literature on sustainable entrepreneurship and relevant practices.

2.1 | Analytic framework

The analytic framework employed in the study is given in Figure 1. It is a diagrammatic representation of the argument that permaculture entrepreneurship requires a combination of favourable organisational subfield-specific institutions and an individual's institutional portfolio, consisting of economic, cultural and social capital. These capitals are implicated with elements of an entrepreneur's institutional biography and wider social factors (e.g., general education) in the more extended field of social practice.

It is not necessary to oppose microsocial and macrosocial accounts. Rather, a practice perspective of entrepreneurship may bring relational networks to the fore, unconstrained by observer-imposed 'levels' of analysis. The approach transcends methodological individualism and undue reliance on the characteristics of individual entrepreneurs. The concern is to advance knowledge of the implication of shared practice with how people in a subfield of practice challenge mainstream institutions through entrepreneurship (Steyaert, 2007) and the construction of collective support (Johannisson, 2011). De Clercq and Voronov (2009) argue that newcomers may gain legitimacy as entrepreneurs within a field by rule following, rule breaking or creation of new rules. However, it may be that newcomers in certain emerging subfields are more concerned with demonstrating and challenging what they see as the *illegitimacy* of practice in prevalent organisational fields and in society at large. Going beyond entrepreneurship as process, 'entrepreneurship' (Johannisson, 2011) or creative entrepreneurial action (Watson, 2013) may be framed as power as practice, drawing attention explicitly to what or how such entrepreneurs 'do, think and feel' (Goss, Jones, Betta, & Latham, 2011: 212; Keating, Geiger, McLoughlin, & Cunningham, 2014) and even whether they see themselves as entrepreneurs.

Considering how entrepreneurs work within yet seek to transcend structural constraints, researchers have pointed up the institutional work that agents do and the elements of their institutional portfolio and biography that allow them to do it. For example, although Scott (2008) identified the institutional pillars which structure, or stabilise, social phenomena in organisational 'fields', others, such as Viale (Viale, 2008; c.f., Bourdieu, 1986), emphasise different kinds of capital inherent in agents' institutional portfolio which enable them to challenge existing institutional rules. Even as human agents are subject to these rules and to some extent conditioned by them, they are not 'imprisoned' by them. Their access to and mobilisation of

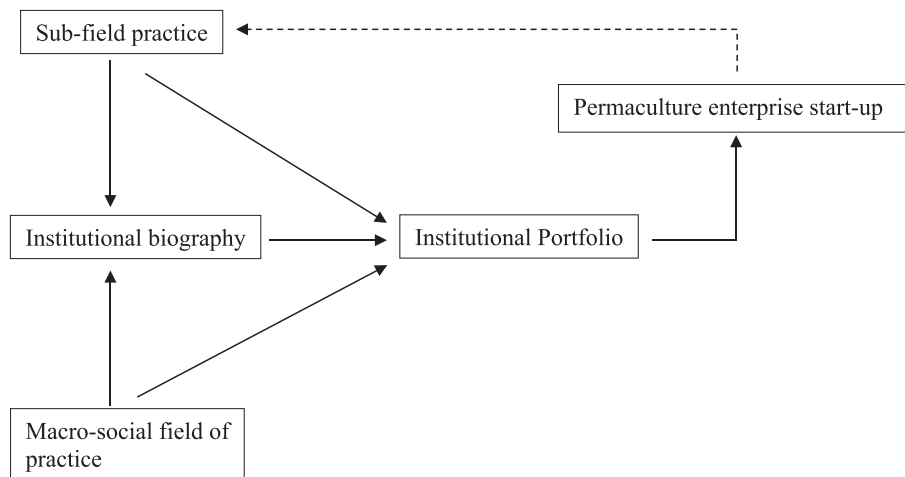


FIGURE 1 Practice and entrepreneurship in permaculture

capitals may allow agents some, though not unconstrained, latitude. Viale (2008) cites the following types of capital: economic, social, cultural (including 'informational') and the symbolic (or legitimating) form of any of the foregoing. These 'capitals' are resources that individuals who are otherwise socialised to adhere to the macrosocial 'institutional fabric' may possess to different degrees and in varying combinations and which engender commitment to undertaking institution-changing initiatives.

Attention to institutional biography (Lawrence et al., 2011), in conjunction with analysis of institutional portfolios, enables a rebalancing of attention from structural phenomena in institutional change to the experiences and work of the individual in a social setting but without lapsing into accounts emphasising the heroism of the entrepreneur. Elements of such a biography would include identification of the constraints and opportunities available to the entrepreneur through their life story, in connection with the organisational field in question. Such an approach has the potential to account for the practices of entrepreneurs and the successes and failures of initiatives they undertake, often with the support of others (Lawrence et al., 2011).

3 | METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on Schatzki's (1997) critique of Bourdieu's work, regarding the ontological priority of practice over actions. 'An action belongs to a given practice' (e.g., farming), when that action expresses understandings, observes rules and/or expresses an 'acceptable order of life condition' that organise the practice in question (Schatzki, 1997: 304). Social phenomena such as institutions are to be 'understood via the structures of and relations among practices' (Schatzki, 1997: 284). Practice approaches account for the development of practices of a field or within a subdomain of that field or take it as a site for examining the 'nature or transformation of their subject matter' (Schatzki, 2001: 11).

The paper is informed by social theory and organisation theory. Drawing on social theory (c.f., Bourdieu, 1986, 1996; Schatzki, 1997,

2001), the study focuses on relationships among the larger social fields of economic and political domination, specialised fields of agriculture, education and gardening and the subfield of permaculture. From the perspective of organisation (*qua* institutional) theory, the paper is concerned with heterogeneity and change in 'organisational' fields. An organisational 'field' has been understood as the community of organisations with which a focal organisation 'frequently and fatefully' interacts (Scott, 1995; c.f., DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) based on a shared institutional logic. Recognition of the prevalence of multiple institutional logics has led to increasing attention to subfields, in which members do not conform with—or actively challenge—rules and practices in the organisational field and possibly in wider societal fields (Oliver, 1991). What one might look for is evidence of symbolic and material 'immunity' (LePoutre & Valente, 2012) from conformity with the 'mainstream' and issue-based relations among subfield members (Hoffmann, 1999). Fundamentally, one investigates how the foregoing is implicated with the organisation of the practice (e.g., of permaculture) and the specific actions undertaken or proscribed by subfield members (Schatzki, 1997; c.f., Bourdieu, 1996).

3.1 | Selection of empirical setting

The focus on permaculture is selected for its potential to generate an insightful account of the interrelation of a subfield of practice (of permaculture), the microsocial practices of adherents of permaculture and the institutionalisation of permaculture-inspired enterprise. Here, permaculture constitutes a subfield of the field of sustainable entrepreneurship. Ferguson and Lovell (2014) identified four distinct (though interconnected) uses of the term 'permaculture': as a world view, as a social movement, as a design system and as a practice framework. If Ferguson and Lovell's (2014) analysis is correct, one would expect to find clear evidence of permaculture philosophy motivating entrepreneurs and influencing practice and clear evidence of their engagement with permaculture as a social movement. Pertinent issues concern the following: (a) the identification of opportunities and constraints, successes and failures associated with

permaculture and entrepreneurship, as gleaned from the institutional biography of entrepreneurs; (b) the individual and organisational capitals of permaculture entrepreneurs and enterprises; (c) the institutional conditions faced by permaculture entrepreneurs, whether adverse or favourable to their businesses; and (d) the nature of the institutional work done by permaculture entrepreneurs and the processes and networks that facilitate this.

3.2 | Data collection

In the first phase of data collection, based on data from the Permaculture Association's (PA) database of 1,500 members (data used with their permission), the researchers undertook (in January 2016) a desk-based mapping of permaculture enterprises in England, using open source civiCRM software. This mapping exercise identified 159 permaculture enterprises in the United Kingdom. A second phase of data collection entailed an online survey of owners/founders of these enterprises, which was completed by 39 respondents (a response rate of 24.5%). Survey questions asked for the following: personal information (e.g., name, age and gender of respondent); educational and professional qualifications, including specific permaculture-related training; recent employment and sources of income, which might be additional to their permaculture enterprise; data on the nature of permaculture businesses of the respondents

(name, longevity, location sector and type of activity); size of business (number of employees, turnover); involvement of women and people of colour as owners or employees of the business; source(s) of funding for the business; motivation for starting up the business and future aspirations (growth, internationalisation). Descriptive statistical analysis of the survey data was facilitated by Excel.

The third phase of data collection included 20 taped-recorded personal interviews averaging 1 h in duration with a nonrandom selection of the survey respondents chosen to represent different types of permaculture businesses and activities and for their potential capacity to shed light on the issues of concern to the study. See Table 1 for a list of interviewees. The interviews were governed by the following research questions: (i) What do 'permaculture' and 'permaculture entrepreneurship' mean to permaculture entrepreneurs? (ii) What in their personal life stories contributed to permaculture entrepreneurs setting up their business (es), and what motivated them? (iii) What, if any, are the knowledge, material, organisational and other requirements of permaculture enterprises? How are they acquired? (iv) What is the role of identified actors, networks and organisations, such as the PA, in the start-up and development of enterprises? In addition to these interviews, the researchers attended training courses and national and regional meetings ('gatherings' and convergences) of permaculture activists and were given tours of farms, gardens or living spaces of interviewees, through which they learned about the lived quality of permaculture and permaculture entrepreneurship.

TABLE 1 List and details of interviewees

Interviewee's Initials (code)	Gender	Organisation activities	Role	Location (UK Region)
US	Male	Housing provider, land management cooperative	Director	West Midlands
NI	Female	Permaculture gardening, publishing, education	Director	South East
LB	Female	Permaculture Design, Education and Coordination	Sole owner	Scotland
BH	Male	Representative organisation for permaculture	Chief executive	Yorkshire/Humber
FU	Male	Permaculture teaching	Sole owner	Scotland
IU	Female	Food production, courses and events.	Sole owner	East Midlands
QU	Male	Environmental community work. Consultation, design and build services for outdoor spaces.	Project coordinator	Yorkshire/Humber
KC	Female	Permaculture landscape design, gardening and teaching	Sole owner	South East
LH	Female	Environmental consultancy, training, eco-facilitation, tutoring, design	Sole owner	South West
DT	Male	Market garden, small mixed farm	Co-owner	South West
OG	Female	Community orchard, education, horticultural therapy, community events,	Operations manager	South West
XS	Male	Food growing, gardening, craft cooperative	Co-founder	North East
BF	Female	Workshops on permaculture	Sole owner	South West
WH	Female	Holiday accommodation	Sole owner	South West
EY	Male	Health and wellbeing	Sole owner	East
EE	Male	IT consultancy	Co-owner	East Midlands
BB	Male	Permaculture education	Sole owner	South West
SD	Male	Developing people, animal breeding, food production	Sole owner	North West
QD	Male	Education and enterprise	Director	North West
HC	Male	Teaching permaculture	Sole owner	Scotland

3.3 | Data analysis

Analysis of interview data entailed: (a) close (re)reading of textual and other material, following transcription; (b) coding and analysis of text according to identified key themes using NVivo computer software for qualitative analysis; (c) interpretation of findings in the light of the codes and themes discerned. The mapping, survey results and interview data help gain a better understanding of the distribution of permaculture enterprises in different geographical areas and business sectors. They reveal other key features of interest, such as common factors between different enterprises, ways in which permaculture ethics, design principles and ecological insights shape the start-up and practice of firms, the personal motivations and 'capitals' of the entrepreneurs. It is the findings on these latter issues that are presented and discussed in the sections below.

All respondents are anonymised; their initials in the quotations are coded.

4 | FINDINGS

The section reports on findings from the project, providing an overview of the subfield of permaculture enterprise in the United Kingdom and presenting factors connected with the institutionalisation of permaculture-inspired entrepreneurship

inherent in the biographies and institutional portfolios and work of entrepreneurs.

4.1 | Characteristics of permaculture enterprises in the United Kingdom

The geographical spread of the permaculture enterprises in the United Kingdom is a mix of rural and urban locations, but rural locations are overrepresented compared with the overall UK population spread. In Figure 2 the 'people' icons represent individual permaculture teachers, and the blue icons show registered businesses and Learning and Demonstration (LAND) Centres. Three business types predominate: teaching, food growing, and garden design and maintenance. However, permaculture entrepreneurs are also working in publishing, cosmetics, tourism, IT, jewellery making, community development, holistic therapies, writing and construction.

Permaculture businesses are likely owned and operated by an individual (44% of the businesses referred to by respondents to the survey), or a two-person (e.g., wife/husband) partnership (18%); 28% of the businesses are community/social enterprises, and 10% have charitable status. In terms of obtaining funding for the start-up, over 35% of enterprises did not require external start-up funding; a quarter relied upon personal savings for start-up finance, sometimes in combination with gifts made to the entrepreneur. For 15% of the

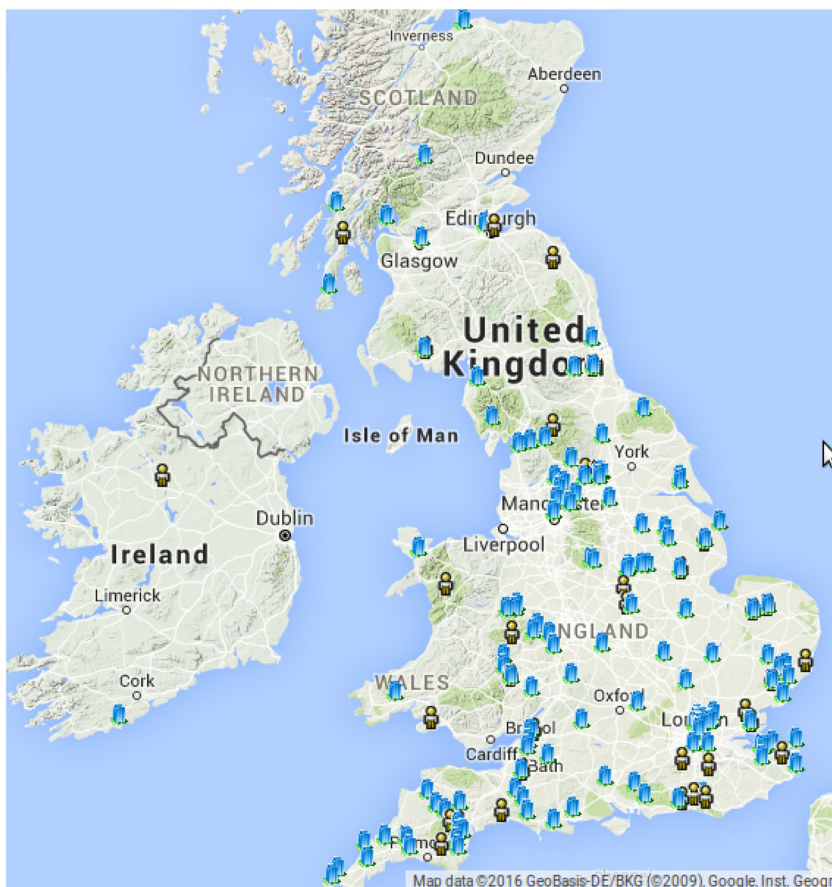


FIGURE 2 Geographical distribution of selected permaculture enterprises in the United Kingdom/Ireland

businesses, an enterprise grant was the main source of financing; in two cases, this grant or personal savings were supplemented by funding from a local authority.

Permaculture enterprises are typically microbusinesses. For example, only one enterprise responding to the survey employed more than 10 employees. In terms of annual turnover, about 40% of the enterprises owned by those surveyed have annual turnover of less than £10,000, and over 75% have annual turnover of £50,000 or less. The vast majority operate on a local or regional basis, but a few enterprises aspire to have customers at a national or international level. This smallness of scale is seen by interviewees as being in line with the principles of permaculture, to quote one respondent:

I do not foresee the prospect at the present time of any permaculture business being other than an SME because again I think to be other than that would be contrary to the principles effectively. (HC)

Most of our interviewees are not only self-employed/sole traders but also use other business models such as becoming community interest companies, coops, limited companies, limited liability partnerships and charities. This means that permaculture entrepreneurs face the same difficulties as other microbusinesses, such as obtaining funding, managing finance and marketing, which could limit growth potential, were it to represent an objective they wished to pursue. At the same time, starting and running a permaculture business can pose additional challenges associated with terminology; for example, references to 'polyincomes' may not be familiar to accountants.

About half of respondents said that their permaculture enterprise is now their sole occupation. Nearly half of respondents are receiving an income from a source other than their permaculture business—theirs is a work life based on 'polyincomes'. The other income sources reported by respondents include the following: retail sales, writing, teaching, environmental business consultancy, community/landscape gardening and selling vegetable boxes. Activities are seen as being pursued within a holistic approach to 'Earth care'.

An important aspect of the study concerned the motivation of interviewees to start-up permaculture businesses. Here, interviewees' responses could be grouped according to several salient common themes. Invariably, they referred to starting a business as stemming from, or as an expression of, their values and commitment to permaculture, to developing an alternative, sustainable economic and/or agricultural system.

Permaculture was seen typically by interviewees and in their own words as 'a framework', 'a set of ethics', a 'design approach' with which to create resilient ecosystems, societies and cultures that support people to meet their basic needs and that work with nature. One informant thus stated that it is 'a legitimate alternative route to take... revisiting... ideas of care for people, care for the Earth, shar[ing] the surplus...' (QD). Another interviewee saw permaculture as 'a way of changing the world... [W]e just wanted to change the world and help people grow their own food' (FU).

Ultimately, permaculture is often seen as a 'way of being', inspiring and framing not only business activities but also having a great impact on people's lives in general, aligning them in 'a much more holistic way' ('Well, permaculture is my life and business.' HC).

Adhering to the ethical principles of permaculture affects people's attitude to finance and the meaning of 'success' as it is applied to permaculture businesses. It appeared very prominent in the interviews that inspiration, working with like-minded people who bring 'spark, drive, enthusiasm and inspiration', positive feedback, serving local communities, being sustainable, making a difference, bringing about change, 'uniqueness' of the business—all create a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment of the goals, making permaculture businesses a worthy pursuit. Some do not see their activities as a commercial enterprise that can be profitable, but the majority of our interviewees do permaculture work to make a living. To quote one informant, 'my main motive is to pay the bills, to eat and keep a roof above our heads and not to be in debt' (WH). It was also common for interviewees to invoke notions of control and flexibility in talking about what permaculture entrepreneurship means to them, summed up by the statement of one interviewee that

Being in control of what I do [is] such a huge thing. It's finding something, work which fits around the time that I've got available with small children and also just finding stuff that felt important and meaningful to me. (LB)

A negative kind of reasoning was also deployed by some interviewees, for whom starting up and continuing with a permaculture-informed business was a worthy pursuit in spite of the 'low returns' and lower income than other means of earning a livelihood. The sense of determination and commitment seems to be very strong among those interviewed for the study, despite the low income generated by most permaculture businesses, which is admittedly a typical feature of permaculture. This coincides with interviewees' attitude to money more generally and preferred lifestyle—as demonstrated in the two following quotations from respondents:

Obviously any type of farm business [...] the income is pretty low [...] Although we don't make a lot of money, we don't really spend a lot of money either. (DT)

So we had some lengthy periods of time where one of us worked for nothing for years and we lived frugally with the kids, it was very difficult. (NI)

It is recognised by some interviewees that there is a potential contradiction between permaculture values. Although all permaculture businesses are referred to as strongly grounded in permaculture theory and principles, for some interviewees, the common shared aims of practising permaculture do not exclude typical 'business' drivers and criteria for successful business, such as a steady growth and making a profit. Those who advocate for more 'entrepreneurial'

approaches attempt to challenge established conventions and criticise permaculture enterprise for its attitude to finance and business success. To quote one respondent

To my mind there's a bit of a culture of failure because if you're successful, people seem to think you've sold out to the dark side. (WH)

Because of the controversial relationship between ethical principles and profit making, the business element is often overlooked by those starting permaculture-inspired businesses. However, our interviews show that this may be changing as attempts are being made to (re)shape common practice by making it more 'entrepreneurial', creating new rules of thinking and behaving. As one interviewee pointed out,

We're learning to be more enterprising and realising that it's not a dirty word to actually accrue abundance, to create abundance amongst systems. (IU)

This tendency was reflected in advice to those who are planning to start a permaculture business—for example, the importance of finding 'the right niche', making 'a natural succession' (i.e., making a transition gradually), business knowledge and skills such as marketing skills and knowledge of the tax system, getting some experience before setting up a business, finding a successful business model (e.g., cooperative), having a business plan (business strategy and financial planning), considering partnerships and calculated risks.¹ Moreover, whereas cooperation is a basic principle of permaculture, some respondents recognise that

We have to encourage cooperation where it's essential and use competition where it's essential but also plan for it happening. (HC)

The changing and different perceptions and attitudes to permaculture businesses are illustrative of some contestation within the subfield over what permaculture should be.

Having said this, one of the key characteristics of permaculture is a strong sense of community in members 'help each other, motivate each other [and] inspire each other' (BB). Interviewees reported receiving support from other permaculturalists, for example, as follows:

I would say that the permaculture community at large are our greatest asset and supporters have been very generous in their support and belief in what we were doing and have really wanted us to succeed.... (NI)

The PA plays an important role in shaping and transmitting values and meanings within permaculture community. PA does this in various ways, such as professional qualifications (i.e., the Permaculture Design Certificate and Diploma in Applied Permaculture), events, publications like the Permaculture Magazine, its website and the use of certain language (e.g., 'gatherings', and the motto phrases 'fair shares', 'Earth care' and 'people care'). Over 80% of survey respondents had developed their understanding of the principles and practice of permaculture through completion of the Permaculture Design Certificate, and nearly 40% had completed the Diploma in Applied Permaculture. PA brings permaculture activists together, for example, at 'gatherings', and it is apparent from the interviews how many of them know and/or work with other members of the PA. It has also directly part-funded some start-ups. The influence on the community is realised through setting and adjusting conventions for permaculture practices and coordination of the social movement.

The growth of the permaculture movement, reported by interviewees, reflects certain trends in the modern society and changes in people's attitudes towards the environment and sustainable living. It is moving from being 'quite alternative' to more 'mainstream'; knowledge sharing and popularisation of permaculture ideas contribute greatly to a better understanding, acceptance and institutionalisation of the subfield, as noted by the following quotations from interviewees:

I think there's a lot of fantastic work being done by a lot of people to get across the message of what permaculture is without having to preach about it so we've got more and more good examples of it. (IU)

The legitimacy of permaculture is still questioned ('has hippyish connotations'), and as argued by those dealing with authorities at different levels, there is 'a long way to go' to achieve full recognition:

Because I am a qualified ecologist, that's what's taken seriously. Permaculture is not a word taken seriously at all. (OG)

As permaculture practice is embedded in a wider field of sustainable entrepreneurship and activities, it is not surprising that permaculturalists often have connections with other sustainability groups and movements. It is recognised that there is 'a lot of overlap' between the subfield of permaculture and sustainability or community-oriented movements. Such links were reported by half of interviewees (e.g., connections with local Transition Towns groups, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Landworkers Alliance and Incredible Edible Boddin), varying from interest and general support to active involvement. The interviews not only reveal some typical features of permaculture practice, shared thinking and attitudes prevailing in the permaculture community in Britain but also demonstrate some heterogeneity in terms of occupations, background and motivation. Looking at institutional biographies and institutional portfolios of permaculture entrepreneurs helps understand how individual paths

¹As one of the aims of the Knowledge Exchange for Entrepreneurship in Permaculture (KEEP) project was to encourage and support permaculture-inspired entrepreneurs, in particular new business startups, the authors produced a Permaculture Enterprise Guide. Available at: <https://permaculture-enterprise.org/advice/>

are shaped and what resources/capitals are regarded as essential for permaculture enterprise.

4.2 | Institutional biographies

Turning to the institutional biographies of interviewees, thematic analysis highlights the importance of the following in accounts of permaculture entrepreneurship: self-employment of family members; family members who foraged, gardened or farmed (whether or not this was explicitly referred to as 'permaculture'); exposure to nature as a child; formal or informal education; previous occupations of the interviewee; experience doing voluntary or community work. Examples of the above abound in the study. For instance, interviewees gave examples of parents who were farmers, chefs or ran a fish and chip shop business.

Others pointed to the interests and dispositions of family members, which shaped their thinking about environmental concerns or self-employment. As one interviewee said:

... being brought up very environmentally aware by my Mum and socially aware by my Dad about social justices and things so those kind of came together to me... I really want to be part of the solution... I learnt a lot through my Dad and running his own businesses... my Mum runs her own farm. I'd worked on different farms through my childhood. (IU)

This is also exemplified not only by the interviewee whose parents were active in the Soil Association but also by the cases in which parents allotted part of the garden at home to the child to grow things. In some cases, the family were keen amateur gardeners and to join in was 'just the norm'. In others, interviewees referred to living near a farm or having childhood friends who liked to grow fruit and vegetables and sell them.

An interesting reference was made by several respondents to grandparents' and parents' foraging and subsistence farming during and after World War Two and how that may have shaped the thinking of interviewees, whether in childhood or sometime later. Another take on this were the 'negative' examples that pointed out how having parents working for large corporations influenced the entrepreneur not to follow to a similar path. As one interviewee said:

My dad worked for [three multinational corporations: a car company, tobacco firm and oil company]... he had to work for a corporation and the corporation got its two-penny worth and it felt like that was probably not the best way to live. (BH)

Interviewees got involved in and learned about permaculture in a number of ways. Some attended formal courses or training in permaculture, environmental studies, sustainability or ecological gardening (such as Patrick Whitefield's Sustainable Land Use course). In some

cases, interviewees began to think about environmental sustainability or permaculture more specifically while at university, where they undertook what might seem to be less related courses in subjects such as fine art, psychology and German, linguistics and education. Others offered stories of how they came to realise that working for a large company or pursuing certain professions was not for them and got 'a feeling' that they needed to do something different, even though they did not quite know what that was yet. Such previous occupations referred to include being a salesperson, software engineer, a sociologist and 'green' roofing.

As one interviewee stated:

The 'passionately believing' bit came about when I was working in the City of London... I was starting to gasp for clean air and green space... it [was] the turning point for me... this first revelation [that] the way the world's being run is not right; it's not sustainable'. (HC)

In some cases, interviewees went from their previous occupation to volunteering or political activity (e.g., with the Green Party, which led to them 'paying more attention to environmental issues').

4.3 | Institutional portfolios

In relation to institutional portfolios, the interview material attests to the range of capitals required to both set up and run a permaculture enterprise. In terms of *economic capital*, there is a view that permaculture entrepreneurs 'don't need [external] money' due to their 'self-reliance' (IU). Typically, however, some entrepreneurs enjoy what one interviewee referred to as the 'funding cushion' of property ownership, whereas others benefited from donations of land and/or cash. A number of entrepreneurs had other paid work, had access to family savings or had partners with jobs, which subsidised their enterprises. Some interviewees pointed to the low costs of their start up, such as the professional IT consultant whose business only needed a couple of computers and an IT assistant who could be paid out of the income earned from well-paid IT contracts, and also those involved in teaching who mainly taught at venues, which already had the required equipment.

Those who did seek external funding obtained it from a variety of sources, such as community funding and crowdsourcing, the UK Lottery, government or local authority regional development or enterprise grants, charities and bank loans. Some interviewees mentioned receiving benefits from the state, such as working tax credit and unemployment benefit. In a couple of cases, funding from the European Union was mentioned, for example, a 3-year Children in Permaculture project funded through the ERASMUS initiative. The PA itself was a source of funding.

Another informant talked about 'doing what's needed' to be able to get £1,000 from a bank, which entailed setting up what turned out to be his current permaculture business and opening up a bank account, both of which he implied that he might not otherwise have

done but for the 'carrot' of this money (EY). He also was the recipient of funding for a Local Food project, which was a partnership bid involving PA. Although the funding from this gave 2 days a week paid work for two years and so 'covered all my bills', it was seen to be a double-edged sword in that it detracted from him focusing on making his permaculture business his main source of income.

Cultural capital in institutionalised form involves academic and professional certificates such as the Permaculture Design Certificate and the Diploma in Applied Permaculture referred to by those surveyed, as well as secondary, graduate and postgraduate degree qualification documents. In objectivised form, cultural capital takes the form of certain foundational books and other cultural products that informants typically refer to. Examples of shared practice here include respondents typically having watched the television programme 'In Grave Danger of Falling Food' featuring Bill Mollison and read the books 'Permaculture A Designer's Manual' and 'Introduction to Permaculture' by Bill Mollison (1988; 1994, with Slay) and 'Permaculture: Principles and Pathways' by David Holmgren (2011). Also mentioned (less commonly) were business self-help books such as 'Get Clients Now'.

As one interviewee said, 'you need a really good grounding in the theory and practice [of permaculture] and... to be a good accomplished designer' (BH). A commonly referred to requirement was knowledge and skills in functional areas such as marketing and IT (e.g., in relation to website development and the use of social media, though which of these is most important varies across interviewees).

In relation to *social capital*, interviewees invariably remarked on the importance of social skills, communication and networking. The dominant view expressed by those interviewed for the project being to emphasise the importance of having a network of peer-to-peer support that helps the permaculture entrepreneurs interviewed and other permaculturalists with whom they engage. As one interviewee said:

The permaculture community at large are our greatest asset and supporters and have been very generous in their support and belief in what we were doing, and have really wanted us to succeed and get our message out to the world. And as our network has grown, that global support has been really evident. (NI)

The various permaculture courses (the permaculture design certificate, the diploma course and other training courses and workshops) appear to be sites at which interviewees build networks, which diffuse practice. They take place in a range of the UK and overseas locations though interviewees also mentioned contacts they make with overseas and non-PA collaborators, such as an olive oil grower in southern Italy and project collaborators in Sao Paolo and Hong Kong. The process by which permaculture entrepreneurs build networks seems to rely partly on individuals 'putting their hand up... to help' by organising meetings (e.g., of permaculture teachers) or assuming roles on PA or other organisation committees.

Respondents typically work in teams with others in the permaculture movement—a common phrase used to describe collaboration therein is 'cooperation not competition' and yet, to quote one interviewee:

there is no doubt that one of the biggest problems we have amongst the teaching community with permaculture is that it's competitive. (HC)

Also, it can be difficult for permaculture entrepreneurs to find information or sources of ideas relevant to permaculture, and that in trying to do so, 'it can be a bit hit and miss meeting with individuals' (QD). Yet another perspective fuses symbolic capital with social capital. Thus, for example, one participant in the project referred to the benefit of being a qualified ecologist in terms of it allowing them to be taken seriously by others in the community, which lends some insight into the process through which legitimacy for permaculture entrepreneurship is acquired.

5 | DISCUSSION

Permaculture offers an opportunity and a site for exploring the nature of practice (Schatzki, 2001), for informing the emerging practice perspective of entrepreneurship (c.f., Johannisson, 2011) and for bridging practice theory with sustainable entrepreneurship. However, there has to date been very little research on permaculture as an institutionalised practice of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Permaculture in the United Kingdom appears as a growing yet still relatively small and geographically dispersed organisational subfield, having meanings that distinguish it from mainstream approaches to food production and distribution, for example. Businesses tend to be a portfolio of complementary activities involving, for example, gardening, food growing and teaching. Permaculture is recognisable to the observer as a shared practice, though the rules and regularity of its practice may be deceptive. This has implications for the legitimacy of permaculture entrepreneurs. Permaculture is an international movement in which the materiality and embodiment of practice is entailed in what permaculturalists do and say, for example, in doing or talking about growing food. Those who learn its principles and rules are active rather than passive actors 'channelling' permaculture. Practitioners share symbolic knowledge necessary to practice permaculture, such as its design principles. It would not appear that one could legitimately claim to practise permaculture in running a business without subscribing to commonly accepted principles such as those implied by the motto 'fair shares, Earth care and people care'. At the same time, the frugality of permaculturalists is not surprising; it fits with the basic notions and practice of permaculture (Holmgren, 2011; Mollison, 1988). Permaculture has its own social institutions—for example, the regular 'gatherings' (and 'convergences'), which permaculturalists attend, web sites and magazine. Language is both a medium of practice and diffuses it. Language inheres in the values that are written down and in the enactment of permaculture, relating to

how work life ought to be done and the taken for grantedness of this culturally, within the 'cult of permaculture', to borrow the term used by one interviewee. The paper argues that these practices are rules that need to be followed to be a legitimate permaculturalist; a permaculture-inspired entrepreneur should not adhere to mainstream conventions of enterprise and entrepreneurship if they are to gain approval from activists in the movement.

The above does not signal, however, that permaculture entrepreneurs all have the *same* knowledge or perfectly replicate some essential principles of permaculture (e.g., the different level of formal qualification in permaculture they may hold). The reproduction of permaculture principles in entrepreneurship challenges notions of integrity about the practice. Thus, not all our respondents have multiple parallel occupations and make their livings from polyincomes (though about half of them do), although their enterprises take a variety of ownership forms. This indicates a plurality of logics and organisational arrangements with which permaculture is being institutionalised (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Thus, although the apparent homogeneity of permaculture attests to the need for individual entrepreneurs to seek legitimacy 'top-down' from the wider collective of activists, evidence of heterogeneity suggests directing attention to how individual permaculture businesses build legitimacy for themselves and thence for the wider movement with the entrepreneur's own client audience.

The paper has implications for hybridity arguments previously advanced concerning the pursuit of multiple goals by sustainable entrepreneurs. The holism underpinning UK permaculture enterprises appears to drive their need to sustain nature, the resources necessary to support human life and communities. These are not to be traded off or seen as incompatible or in competition, challenging the hybridity argument of some scholars of sustainable entrepreneurship (c.f., Battilana & Lee, 2014; McMullen & Warnick, 2016). Further, permaculture entrepreneurs emphasise noneconomic gains to society and nature, with the pursuit of individual economic gain given low priority beyond that, which is necessary to 'pay the bills'. In relation to institutional entrepreneurship, permaculturalists practice and seek to diffuse the practice of unconventional design rules with respect to creating resilient ecosystems. Here, the main priority is caring for the planet and treating others fairly; one only needs to make enough money to live on. This point about frugality of permaculture entrepreneurs fundamentally challenges assumptions of profit seeking that typify research on entrepreneurship and sustainable entrepreneurship.

In relation to the importance of institutional biographical phenomena and portfolios to the start-up and operation of their permaculture businesses, a number of remarks may be made. Permaculture entrepreneurs learn principles of permaculture from various sources at different points of their lives. Examining their life stories thus enables depiction of how biographical events both offer opportunities for and (e.g., financial) constraints on informants in the practice of permaculture. In so doing, they provide accounts of how the 'small' worlds of individual entrepreneurs draw on wider institutional resources and practice (Lawrence et al., 2011). For example, most respondents in our study have parents and other family members who gardened, foraged or farmed. The disposition of permaculture

entrepreneurs to be self-employed may have been shaped by a family history in which parents ran their own business, which may or may not have been related to horticulture or agriculture. The 'push' factor of entrepreneurs—or their relatives—having been previously employed in unsatisfactory occupations should not be underestimated in their gravitation towards permaculture and setting up businesses inspired by its values.

The paper supports the view that institutional biography complemented by analysis of institutional portfolios can generate insights into institutional entrepreneurship and work (Viale & Suddaby, 2009), in this case, tied to the practice of permaculture. The paper distinguishes different kinds of capital within the institutional portfolios of permaculture entrepreneurs. For example, they build cultural capital through undergoing formal education in permaculture, or through their own reading or watching films about it. In relation to economic capital, permaculture entrepreneurs are not typically the 'underserved'—they have access to funds, whether from spouses, parents or elsewhere. In relation to building social capital, permaculture entrepreneurs acquire knowledge through personal networks with other UK permaculturalists (but also overseas partners) or through peers, whether friends or contacts made through volunteering, community or party-political activities.

Through the above coordinated and uncoordinated activities, people learn about permaculture and develop their practice of permaculture entrepreneurship. This is not unproblematic, though, as some interviewees noted, permaculture entrepreneurs may well compete for the same business or funding, and business and/or personal rivalries may develop. Permaculture practitioners may share principles and practice, but this does not mean that they do not compete for custom to make a living. The difficulties faced by permaculture entrepreneurs concern some familiar problems experienced by other microbusinesses or SMEs: obtaining funding, managing finance and marketing/social media management. Arguably, these elements currently sit outside of permaculture practice but are required for the practice of permaculture entrepreneurship.

Permaculture entrepreneurs work with well-defined, shared overarching values, which challenge mainstream practices connected with how lives should be led and how work should fit with those lifestyles. These centre on the precept of working with and from nature to consciously apply principles of ecological design to (earning a) living. They are implicated with how entrepreneurship is understood and practised by permaculturalists and with their motivations for starting up businesses. Noneconomic gain predominates as the motivation to start-up businesses. However, there is variability in the precise manner in which permaculture is enacted in setting up and running a small business. There may also be a confidence and a clarity about how permaculture entrepreneurs talk about what they do and share regarding their businesses, which belies the heterogeneity that becomes apparent on closer inspection. This heterogeneity applies to the institutional biographies and portfolios of permaculture entrepreneurs, differences in experience, predisposition, knowledge and networks that are written into the practices and institutionalisation of permaculture entrepreneurship. This all makes for a picture of

institutionalisation marked by juxtaposed similarities and differences among actors in the emerging field of permaculture entrepreneurship, rather than the neat image of homogeneous structures and identities characteristic of dominant neo-institutional approaches.

6 | CONCLUSION

The study sought to answer the following research question: What factors foster the institutionalisation of practices relevant to the growth of permaculture-inspired entrepreneurship in the United Kingdom? This exploratory project was undertaken in the context of concerns about the implications for entrepreneurship of increasingly insecure employment and the mitigation of human-made climate change, for which permaculture appears to be well-adapted. However, permaculture is a phenomenon that has been overlooked by scholars of entrepreneurship and offers insights into the connections among macrosocial factors, microworlds and practices, and institutional entrepreneurship. The project informs ongoing work on sustainable entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship as practice and institutional entrepreneurship, which situates the values and capabilities of the individual entrepreneur within domains of shared practice.

By examining permaculture entrepreneurship in the United Kingdom, the paper extends the boundaries of entrepreneurship research and practice, as recently called for by Shepherd (2015) and Welter et al. (2016). The paper adds to existing knowledge by highlighting the institutional biographical phenomena and institutional portfolios of permaculture entrepreneurs. These are fundamental to how entrepreneurs seek to reshape 'mainstream' practices and business models from the 'outside' of incumbent fields (c.f., Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006 on the 'paradox of embedded agency'). Although these entrepreneurs have been subject to the socialisation 'rules' of society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), studying their institutional biographies shows they have been exposed to counter-cultural thinking, which pervades the actions they later take. Family and personal networks shape and allow the sharing of relevant values and practices. To start up, a permaculture enterprise is one aspect of the practice of a worldview of permaculture. This fundamentally challenges the conventional view of sustainable entrepreneurship as a process through which entrepreneurs (hip) address social and environmental objectives.

In terms of institutional portfolios (Viale, 2008; Viale & Suddaby, 2009), the study shows that permaculture entrepreneurs tend to have access to economic capital, either from personal savings or family sources. Cultural capital is gained through reading key texts, and taking courses in permaculture—such study is undertaken by activists who are already well qualified in terms of formal educational attainments. In relation to social capital, permaculture is a community that affords many opportunities for networking that facilitates the sharing of ideas and practices among members. The PA is a key agent in promoting permaculture enterprise and transforming the lives of those who commit to permaculture and starting up permaculture enterprises. Fundamentally, the

capitals, aspirations and understanding developed over the course of entrepreneurs' lives are integral to the structure of practice in the subfield of permaculture. The practice facilitates the identification of actions that are legitimate for permaculture entrepreneurs to take (i.e., as distinct from the mainstream) in going about 'doing' permaculture. However, this does not happen deterministically or universally; there remains scope for improvisation and local interpretation; so permaculture is reproduced unevenly in practice, and there is heterogeneity within a subfield that is generally quite 'tight'.

There are several possible avenues for future research. First, data collection here was limited to one country (United Kingdom), whereas greater and more robust insights might be derived from a larger, comparative study on practice, entrepreneurship in the international permaculture movement. Second, a future study could include larger, quite profitable firms, which are active within the permaculture movement but did not feature in the project. This could address heterogeneity within the subfield or the intersections and boundaries of related organisational fields. Third, a future project could further investigate the grey area between those who adhere to permaculture and those who merely operate according to prevailing principles of sustainability and fairness, focusing on what this distinction might mean for practices pursued and institutional or sustainable entrepreneurship. Fourth, future research could examine the significance of lack of ethnic diversity, competition between permaculturalists or actions taken by the PA itself to practice and limited institutionalisation of the movement. Although individual permaculture firms challenge prevailing institutions (e.g., of agriculture) through practice, the potential for emancipatory 'entrepreneurship' (Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009) lies partly in the collective practice of the permaculture movement. This needs to be understood in relation to a complex of subfield, field-related institutional and societal phenomena, which shape and may be shaped by the practice of permaculture entrepreneurship.

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